

Chapter-IV

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The above discussion on different theories of meaning can not offer any suitable definition of meaning. Moreover, from it follows two negative outcome which are undoubtedly mention-worthy. The first is : meaning can never be identified as something objectively specifiable. The second outcome casts doubt on the possibility of a theory of meaning as such. A little reflection on these two outcome, I think, would throw some light on the problem of meaning and thereby would place us in a somewhat better position to get answer of the above three questions such as:

- 1.) Is there any entity called meaning? If so, what sort of entity it is?
- 2.) What do we mean by 'meaning' of an expression?
- 3.) What kind of relation holds between an expression and its meaning?

The failure of the referential theory clearly points to the fact that meaning cannot be identified as an entity. If it were so, this particular theory of meaning would be counted as a satisfactory one offering a general explanation of meaning. Again, the very fact that the problem of meaning may turn into two other problems like the problem of making sense of the notion of significant sequence or having a meaning, and the problem of making sense of the notion of synonym peculiar to grammarians and

lexicographers respectively, proves that meaning cannot have any objective reality. Quine says:

"What had been the problem of meaning boils down now to a pair of problems in which meaning is best not mentioned; one is the problem of making sense of the notion of significant sequence, and the other is the problem of making sense of the notion of synonymy".¹

Moreover, the basic difference between the process of comprehending an entity and the process of understanding the meaning of an expression clearly suggests the view that meaning cannot be identified as an entity. In this connection, Alston says that whereas to understand an entity one must have appropriate criteria of classification and individuation — these two conditions are not required in course of learning the meaning of the expressions like 'procrastination', 'gradually', 'if' and so on. In fact, in such cases, meaning can only be talked about in its own terms. One is said to have understood meaning of these expressions only if he is able to use their synonymous expressions, such as 'procrastination' means 'putting things off', 'gradually' means 'bit by bit', 'if' means 'provided by'.²

1. Quine, W.V.O., "Meaning in Linguistics", From A Logical Point of View, Harvard University Press, 1953, p. 49.

2. Alston, P., "The Quest for Meanings" in Mind, Vol. 72, pp. 82-83.

By casting doubt on the possibility of a theory of meaning the second outcome puts before us an important question in the following form : Is it really impossible to talk about a theory of meaning? In other words, in connection with ordinary language can't we construct a theory of meaning at all?

However, in order to face the above question, what I think necessary is to point out the following three reasons standing as obstacles on the way to construct a theory of meaning as such. These three reasons under headings (i) Different attitudes of philosophers towards language, (ii) Failure to distinguish between two stages of language, (iii) Failure to understand the use of an expression in multiverious senses, are discussed in details as under.

1) Different attitudes of philosophers towards language

While constructing a theory of meaning, philosophers have looked at meaning from various angles. As underlying reason of it, I would like to mention philosophers' different attitudes towards language. M.N. Mitra, in his article 'Constraints in the construction of a philosophical theory' points out 'attitude towards life of a particular philosopher' as ultimate constraint in the construction of a philosophical theory.¹ Following M.N. Mitra, it can be

1. Mitra, M.N., "Constraints in the construction of a philosophical theory" in Philosophical Papers, Vol. I, edited by Roy, P.K., North Bengal University, 1986, p. 16.

said that to construct a theory of meaning philosophers have been guided by their different attitudes towards language. Hence, it has been noticed that some philosophers have tried to construct a theory of meaning by considering language as a reflection of reality while others talk about a theory of meaning considering language as reflection of our thought about reality and so on. Not only that, so far as language is concerned, attitudes of some philosophers have also changed in course of time. In this respect, the picture theory of early Wittgenstein and the use theory of later Wittgenstein can be noted.

Moreover, philosophers trying to formulate a theory of meaning have not attached equal importance to the three main aspects of language — syntax, semantics and pragmatics. In fact, different theories seek to explain the notion of meaning in terms of different aspects of language. Thus, it has been noticed that while the referential theory, the Behavioral theory, etc. try to explain meaning in terms of semantics, the use theory, the verification theory, etc. seek to explain meaning in terms of pragmatics aspect.

ii) Failure to distinguish between two stages of language.

Philosophers willing to formulate a theory of meaning have failed to distinguish between two stages of ordinary language — learning stage and compositional stage, and focus their attention

mainly on the learning stage. In fact, the distinctive features of these two stages have been overlooked by the philosophers. They fail to realise that since in course of learning a language, meaning of expressions are mostly dependent on availability of some concrete situation, a theory of meaning can work, if it works at all, only in learning stage. Hence, philosophers like Davidson, in the theory of radical interpretation points out that theory of meaning works for simplest sentence.¹ C. Bhattacharyya who does identify the above two stages of language as rock-bottom stage and free stage, says that to learn or to understand meaning of expressions at this rock-bottom stage, we are mostly dependent on things, events, etc. These concrete situations, according to him, bring meaning to the surface.²

On the other hand, compositional stage of a language is comparatively a free stage. Meaning in this stage does not generally depend on any concrete situation. In fact, creativity, spontaneity are distinctly manifested in this stage. Consequently, in such stage, language sometimes acquires a mysterious power. Hence, meaning of some expressions involving in this stage are self-revealing and unique. Due to this unique character, determination of meaning of such expressions do not depend on any other

1. Bhattacharya, C., "On the uniqueness of meaning", (from an unpublished paper)

2. Ibid.

factors whether linguistic or extra-linguistic in any straight forward way. Consequently, question of formulating a theory of meaning in the compositional stage becomes less significant.

iii) Failure to understand the use of an expression in multivarious senses.

At the time of framing a theory of meaning, philosophers ignore the very fact that in ordinary language a good number of expressions may be used in more than one sense. And in this regard, the phrase 'meaning of an expression' is not an exception. The variant use of this particular phrase have been reflected in the following statements:

- 1) 'Gradually' means 'bit by bit.'
- 2) 'Procrastination' means 'putting things off.'
- 3) 'If' means 'provided by.'
- 4) That look on his face means displeasure.
- 5) Black clouds mean heavy rainfall.
- 6) The shouting of the cow-boy saying 'wolf' means he is in danger.

A careful examination reveals the fact that in the above six statements meaning have been used not in a single sense. In fact, the sense in which meaning has been used in first three statements 1,2,3 is quite different from the sense used in the remaining three statements 4,5,6. However, in the first three

statements meanings of the expressions have been specified in terms of other expressions. In other words, in each of the statements 1,2 and 3 'meaning of an expression' consists only in literal reproduction of the concerned expression. Thus, 'gradually' have been specified in terms of 'bit by bit', 'procrastination' by 'putting things off' and 'If' by 'provided that'. Hence, meaning used in this particular sense may be characterised as literal meaning.

On the other hand, in statements 4,5 and 6 'meanings of expressions' do not consist in literal reproduction of the concerned expressions as in 1,2 and 3. Here, 'meaning of an expression' does depend on some extra linguistic factor. And it cannot be said that this extra linguistic factor would remain the same in each case. Thus, in (4), extra linguistic factor is identified with the capacity to read out a particular look, in (5), it is identified with the power of understanding the causal relation between black clouds and rainfall and in (6), extra linguistic factor is the power to grasp the intention of the shouting cowboy. As distinguished from literal meaning, the sense of meaning used in 4,5 and 6 may be characterised as distorted meaning. Again, corresponding to different extra linguistic factor distorted meaning has variety use. Thus, for example, distorted meaning in (4) has been used in sense of suggestiveness, in (5), in sense of prediction and in (6), in sense of intention.

Anyway, a question may be raised here that since meaning of an expression involving in an analytic statement consists only

in its literal reproduction, what is required for the present purpose is to focus attention on literal meaning, i.e. meaning used in statements (1), (2) and (3) distinguished from distorted meaning used in (4), (5) and (6).

However, a closer examination of the statements, 'gradually' means 'bit by bit', 'procrastination' means 'putting things off', 'if' means 'provided by' would enable us to notice that there arises no difficulty regarding the determination of meaning. In each of these statements it has been clearly stated that meaning of an expression does consist only in another expression and in nothing else. And as soon as this point is admitted, out of the three basic questions of meaning with which we have started such as:

- 1) Is there any entity called meaning? If so, what sort of entity it is?
- 2) What do we mean by 'meaning' of an expression?
- 3) What kind of relation holds between an expression and its meaning?

answers to the first two become available. By putting emphasis on literal reproduction it can clearly be shown that meaning of an expression can in no way be identified as an entity of a sort and if we truly want to specify meaning of an expression, it would be possible only in terms of another expression and nothing else.

Now, in connection with answering question (3) also, the above version would face no difficulty at all. Regarding the kind of relation holding between expression and what it means, it could be pointed out that it is only on the basis of the notion of synonymy that we can identify 'gradually' with 'bit by bit', 'procrastination' with 'putting things off', 'if' with 'provided by' and so on.

However, the point is that although at first sight the above version of meaning appears to be very much promising, it cannot achieve the desired result. It is undoubtedly true that specification of meaning is more fundamental use of meaning than any other use of it and the role of literal meaning in the following aspects can in no way be ignored:

- 1) The very condition of learning a language presupposes the learning of its literal meaning.
- 2) Without prior knowledge of literal meaning of an expression, one would be able neither to understand nor to use the expression in any distorted sense.
- 3) To know the meaning of an expression presupposes to know it in literal sense i.e. not in any distorted sense. Somebody may not be accused of not knowing the meaning of the expression 'wolf' while he fails to grasp the intention of the shouting cowboy. Now, in the same way, it cannot be said that one does know the meaning

of the expression 'gradually' without knowing 'bit by bit'.

4) From the standpoint of language also, literal meaning of an expression may be considered as more fundamental than its distorted meaning. Hence, while understanding of distorted meaning requires some extra linguistic capacity, literal meaning requires no such capacity.

5) A study of literal meaning is required in a number of cases like translation, oblique reference and in any metalinguistic use where meaning in the first order language needs to be stabilised. Hence, it has been argued that we feel the need for literal meaning whenever a standardization of meaning becomes central to a particular linguistic function.¹

6) It has been pointed out,

"Lack of contextual determinism makes literal meaning less specific and therefore more accommodative to variation".²

Despite the above advantages, the following objections have been raised against the role of literal meaning in a language.

1) It has been argued that meaning in this sense of linguistic pattern may be used only within an abstract deductive system as follows:

1. Moitra, Shefali, "Literal Meaning and the Role of Context" in Logical Form Predication and Ontology, ed. by Sen, Pranab Kumar, Macmillan India Ltd., 1982, p. 191.

2. Ibid.

"Here the term originally assumed will be 'undefined'; and other terms, introduced by definition, will be assigned a meaning only in the sense of stipulated relation to these undefined terms. The whole set of such terms, defined and undefined together, will have only such meaning as accrues to them through such definitive relationships to one another and through some set of further postulated relations which limit the possible interpretation of them. Within such an abstract system, the terms used will have meaning only to the extent and in the sense determined by the complex pattern of analytic relationships, originating in stipulations of linguistic usage and exhibited in extenso in the system itself as deductively developed".¹

2) It has been pointed out

"If we think of the meaning of words and expressions only as something specifiable in terms of other words and other expressions, then it must strike us that all use of language has somewhat the character of such an abstract deductive system".²

1. Lewis, C. I., "Linguistic Meaning And Sense Meaning", in An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation, Open Court, La Saue, Illinois, 1971, pp. 139-140.

2. Ibid, p. 140.

3. If meaning of an expression is specifiable only in terms of another expression, meaning in that case would suffer from circularity.

4. It has been argued that if meaning of an expression does end in another expression actually it would express nothing. Hence, the 'language system' as a whole would 'have no interpretation', and there would be no such fact as the meaning of language.¹

However, with the help of the above arguments some philosophers have tried to establish the view that specification of meaning in terms of another expression should not be considered as proper account of meaning since such specification would actually explain nothing.

Anyway, in the above circumstances, any suitable account of meaning, I think, should take two negative and one positive stand-point. Negatively, such account would refrain from adopting the following two tendencies: 1) to consider meaning-statement as identity-statement; 2) to overlook the fundamental role played by the notion of synonymy in determining meaning of an expression. And from the positive point of view, on the other hand, such account would explain the understanding of meaning merely as a process and not as a product.

1. Ibid, p. 140.

Now, in order to show that meaning-statement should not be identified with identity-statement, we are to look at the following statements:

- a) The capital of India is Delhi.
- b) The first man on the top of the Everest is Tenzing.
- c) Procrastination means putting things off.
- d) If means provided by.

Among the above four, the first two statements are considered as identity statements while the remaining two are meaning statements. That the identity-statements and the meaning-statements are not of the same category rather quite different from each other can be shown by the following reasons:

1) In each of the above statements (a) and (b) a name of entity is referred to by definite description. That is to say, in an identity statement a definite description does identify the name of the entity. Thus, 'the capital of India' does refer to Delhi, 'the first man on the top of the Everest' does refer to Tenzing. Whereas in each of the statements (c) and (d) there is neither any entity nor any definite description of it. A meaning can be referred to only as a meaning. Hence, any question regarding the identification of meaning-statement with identity-statement does not arise at all.

ii) Conditions for understanding meaning-statements is quite different from conditions of understanding identity-statements. An identification picks out the particular individual or type from other individuals or types. According to Alston, to understand an identity-statement one must have appropriate criteria of (1) classification and (2) individuation, while understanding a meaning-statement is a matter of knowing (in practice) the conditions under which two words have the same use.¹

iii) That a meaning-statement is quite different from an identity-statement can be shown by the fact that if somebody fails to identify the first man on the top of the Everest with Tenzing, he would not be accused of not knowing the meaning of the expression 'the first man on the top of the Everest'. On the other hand, in case of a meaning-statement like 'procrastination means putting things off', if somebody fails to identify 'procrastination' with 'putting things off' he would be accused of not knowing the meaning of the expression 'procrastination'.

The above difference between the meaning-statements and identity-statements is sufficient to show that any attempt to assimilate these two types of statements is bound to be futile.

1. Alston, P., "The Quest for Meanings", in Mind, Vol. 72, pp. 82-83.

In the same way it can be showed that without taking into account the role of synonymity any attempt to explain meaning is bound to be futile. Quine points out

"Once the theory of meaning is sharply separated from the theory of reference, it is a short step to recognizing as the primary business of the theory of meaning simply the synonym of linguistic forms and the analyticity of statements".¹

In fact, philosophers who think that if meaning of an expression is specifiable in terms of another expression it would serve no purpose of language, actually overlook the second part of the slogan 'meaning of an expression is specified in terms of another expression synonymous with the first'. The second part i.e. 'synonymous with the first' does imply that to determine meaning of an expression we cannot be guided by individual will. That is to say, as meaning of a particular expression we cannot identify any expression of language. It is needless to say that there must be some criterion according to which we would be able to specify a synonymous expression as meaning of a particular expression. Now, what would be the criterion of synonymity is not our concern here. It is only to point out that the failure to understand the role of synonymity is nothing but failure to

1. Quine, W.V.O., "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" in From A Logical Point of View, Harvard University Press, 1953, p. 22.

understand a crucial point involving in meaning-situation. And as a result of it, any account of meaning, I think, would bound to be improper.

In the light of the above account if we look at the problem of meaning, it would appear in somewhat new form. What has been considered as the problem of meaning so far, would actually be a problem of synonymity now. The basic problem would consist not in 'what would be the criterion to determine the meaning of an expression?' rather in 'what would be the criterion to determine a synonymous expression serving as meaning of another expression?' Hence, attempts of the theories to identify meaning sometimes with referrent, sometimes with idea, sometimes with use, sometimes with truth and so on -- would not be considered as correct step of explaining meaning. Since, meaning of an expression would always be another expression, any question like 'what do we mean by meaning of an expression?' should not be entertained. In consequence, the main theme of each of the different theories of meaning would turn in the following ways. Thus, 'meaning of an expression is its referrent' would turn into 'meaning of an expression is another expression having the same referrent', 'meaning of an expression is the idea it evokes' would be 'meaning of an expression is another

expression evoking the same idea', 'meaning of an expression is its truth-condition' would turn into 'meaning of an expression is another expression having the same truth-value', 'meaning of an expression is its use' would turn into 'meaning of an expression is another expression having the same use' and so on. Hence, theories of meaning might be labelled as theories of synonymity. And this particular notion of synonymity would rightly deserve proper explanation which it lacks most and needs most.

The positive standpoint of an adequate account of meaning, I think, should consist of understanding meaning of an expression as a process. The earlier discussion on meaning has clearly pointed out that neither meaning can be identified as an entity of a sort, nor can it be embodied in the series of sounds or in the series of ink-marks. Rather, meaning of an expression can only be grasped or understood. Now, to hear and to understand an expression which is heard is not a question of recognizing previously learned sentences. In fact, to speak in a language is to be able to construct sentences never constructed before and to understand sentences never heard before. It is, however, a creative process. According to Noam Chomsky,

"... the normal use of language is innovative, in the sense that much of what we say in the course of normal language use is entirely new, not a repetition of anything that we have heard before".¹

Now, since understanding meaning of an

1. Chomsky, Noam, Language and Mind Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1968, p. 10.

expression is a process it would be wrong to speak of meaning as something abstracted from that process. Consequently, without taking into account the process of understanding any account of meaning, I think, would bound to be incomplete. Anyway, the process involving in understanding meaning of an expression would be considered as a circular process.

At one end of this process there is the speaker or the writer, while at another end is the hearer or the reader. The speaker or the writer objectivizes his subjective thought through a linguistic expression. The hearer or the reader on the other hand, goes through the expression and then subjectivizes the thought. Hence, output of the speaker or the writer becomes input of the hearer or the reader. And the process involves two types of meaning — intended or given meaning, i.e. meaning which the speaker intends to communicate and received meaning, i.e. meaning which the hearer does grasp. Now, proper understanding of the meaning of an expression does depend on the synonymy of these two types of meaning — intended meaning and received meaning, failing of which results misunderstanding or misinterpreting the meaning.

Now, in the light of the above discussion if we look at the concept of meaning the basic question concerning meaning such as 'What do we mean by meaning of an expression?' would now turn into 'What do we mean by understanding the meaning of expression?' And since understanding the meaning of an expression is nothing but understanding a process — a process involving synonymy of

intended meaning and received meaning, it becomes really difficult to talk about meaning in any absolute sense.

Now, the point is that if in ordinary language speaking of meaning in absolute sense is not possible, then in such language it would not be equally possible to construct a theory of meaning. The notion of a theory of meaning is tied up with the notion of absolute meaning.

Just as in the preceding chapter, here also question may be raised regarding the possibility of exact synonymy of two types of meaning, namely, received meaning and intended meaning. The question is : 'Can we speak of exact synonymy of intended meaning and received meaning?' Now, in connection with the question, it can be pointed out that the problem of finding out exact synonymy of intended meaning and received meaning is a problem mostly peculiar to creative aspect of ordinary language. As underlying reason, it can be mentioned that in such aspect of language understanding of meaning does not depend on linguistic or extra-linguistic factor in a straight way. However, the earlier discussion on synonymy has led to the conclusion that if we are to talk about synonymy in ordinary language, it is only the degrees of likeness of meaning we are referring to. In the same way it can be said that understanding of the meaning of an expression presupposes more or less likeness of intended meaning and received meaning. The more the received meaning would be nearer to intended meaning, the more accurate would be the process of understanding.